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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001902

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TAGS: [IS](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: MGLE01: PM SINIORA UPBEAT ON ELECTORAL REFORM AND  
CONTINUED POLITICAL PROGRESS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

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[11](#). (C) PM Siniora is optimistic that Lebanon's draft electoral law will survive intact upcoming debates in the Cabinet and Parliament. Although the size of the electoral districts could be a sticking point with several constituencies, Siniora believes the overall beneficial impact of a new electoral law (and a fundamental desire to replace the flawed 2000 Electoral Law) will produce sufficient support for its passage. Concerning his two principal adversaries, Michel Aoun and Hassan Nasrallah, the Prime Minister believes both figures have suffered loss of support among Lebanon's moderates due to recent missteps. In particular, Siniora stated his opinion that Aoun has consistently misread popular sentiment and is now stumbling badly. Siniora maintained that despite the efforts of the March 8 alliance (Hizballah, Amal, Free Patriotic Movement) to undermine his government, both political and economic reforms are steadily advancing. End summary.

[12](#). (C) PM Fouad Siniora received the Ambassador and poloff at his offices in the Grand Serail on June 9. His senior advisor, former Ambassador Mohammed Chattah, and his assistant, Rola Nourradine, also attended the meeting. Siniora was noticeably upbeat about recent political developments and projected considerable confidence regarding future prospects, particularly with what he perceived as a perceptible loss of power by his political nemesis, Hassan Nasrallah.

ELECTORAL LAW

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[13](#). (C) Prime Minister Siniora acknowledged that the emphasis on smaller electoral districts in the draft law is a concern to Saad Hariri's Future Movement because it will probably reduce the ruling party's majority in Parliament. But Siniora said dispassionate analysis also indicates that all of the major political blocs will lose delegates, including Hizballah and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). But as long as the projected losses are minor and do not change the relative distribution of power, Siniora believes the other broadly popular features of the draft -- overseas voting, lowered voting age, equitable financing and media rules, more "genuine" confessional representation -- will persuade Lebanon's political elite to endorse its adoption.

[14](#). (C) In Siniora's opinion, the fact that the draft law

was written by a professional commission with broad confessional representation, makes it somewhat impervious to sectarian criticism. Siniora admitted the law's complexity (with a combination of small "qada" districts and proportional representation in larger "muhafaza" districts) is off-putting to many (including Maronite Patriarch Sfeir). But if the law is given a reasonable hearing in Parliament, he believes the advantages of the proposed system will become apparent.

15. (C) Another argument in the law's favor, according to Siniora, is that the only real alternative to the draft law is for Lebanon to remain with the flawed existing statute, which was implemented under Syrian guidance in 2000 and is universally recognized as incompatible with the country's political aspirations. Siniora stated that everyone across the political spectrum understands that the hard-fought achievements of the electoral law reform commission are unlikely to be repeated if the draft is rejected outright.

16. (C) The Prime Minister observed that there will always be criticism of any electoral proposal, because Lebanon is constantly trying to reconcile the fact that while the law says Christian-Muslim political power will be a 50-50 proportion, the reality is that only about 38 percent of the population is now Christian. At the end of the day, he concluded, both groups have to compromise.

#### MISSTEPS BY BOTH AOUN AND NASRALLAH

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17. (C) Commenting on the June 8 session of the ongoing National Dialogue, PM Siniora said that because no one wishes to be the person to end it, the process will probably continue beyond its next scheduled meeting on June 28.

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Siniora said he thought the March 14 response to Hizballah's earlier presentation of its defense strategy was "appropriate." He said that prior to the meeting, the March 14 alliance decided "not to push Hizballah hard and produce the stubbornness that develops when they are cornered." (Comment: Marwan Hamadeh told us separately that March 14 took this relatively low-key approach because of fear that confessional tensions, after the June 1 Shia demonstrations, were to the point of breaking out into renewed civil war. End comment.)

18. (C) In Siniora's view, Hizballah was already on the defensive as a result of the chaotic hostilities along the Blue Line on May 28 and the similar lack of control exhibited in the street demonstrations of June 1. Siniora said that Hassan Nasrallah doesn't like to be seen as reactive and Hizballah as undisciplined, because he realizes those perceptions greatly increase non-Shia anxiety toward the organization. Although Hizballah continues to have near-monopolistic support in the Shia community, Siniora believes the organization's miscues are mounting and have definitely eroded its prior widespread support among Lebanon's larger body politic. He implied that Hizballah was painting itself into the corner, and this outcome has always the goal of the March 14 alliance.

19. (C) Likewise, Siniora felt that Michel Aoun, who only a few weeks earlier had been calling loudly for the resignation of the government and new elections, had committed mistakes that were slowly, but steadily, eroding his influence in the Christian community. Dating back to the FPM/Hizballah joint communique of February 6 and the labor demonstrations of May 14, Siniora said the Aounists had created the public perception that there was little political space between the FPM and Hizballah. (Note: This stance was reinforced on June 11 when the FPM was highly visible at the launch of Sulieman Franjiyah's pro-Syrian Marada party in Zgharta. End note.)

¶10. (C) The Prime Minister remarked that Aoun, in his political arrogance, didn't realize that many of his anti-government strategies could also be viewed as anti-reform, and eventually result in some loss of his community's support. But recent polling seems to have shaken Aoun, and one consequence, in Siniora's opinion, had been a series of "increasingly stupid" Aoun proposals. These included: that Aoun should travel to Damascus with Siniora, that the UNSC should pass a resolution rejecting settlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and that a "national determination" be enunciated on Lebanon's status with Israel. Siniora stated that Aoun is desperately trying to re-seize the initiative and recoup his evaporating support.

#### EMPHASIZING NATION BUILDING

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¶11. (C) Instead of needlessly antagonizing Hizballah, Siniora suggested that March 14 wisely took the high road in the June 8 national dialogue session, and emphasized nation building. He assured the Ambassador that the pro-reform alliance had answered Hizballah point-for-point with regard to defense strategy, but did so in such a way that Hizballah will be hard pressed to argue against the March 14 message, because it would in effect be arguing against Lebanon as a sovereign state.

¶12. (C) "Nasrallah definitely wants to go back to the mountain top," commented Siniora, alluding to the Shia leader's previous status as the unassailable personification of the "resistance." But the Prime Minister said that Nasrallah's participation in the dialogue as simply one of several leaders, as well as his organization's seeming lack of discipline in recent events, had made that wish improbable.

¶13. (C) Overall, PM Siniora indicated the March 14 alliance was in a better political position than it had been for several months. He informed the Ambassador that his government was gradually, but surely, pushing through appointments and measures that would create an ever more stable foundation for reform.

#### KOFI ANNAN'S LETTER

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¶14. (C) Siniora conveyed satisfaction with the letter from Kofi Annan that recommended a bilateral delineation of the Syrian-Lebanese border as a prelude to a resolution of the

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Shebaa Farms question. He indicated it was one more tool with which to prod the Syrian regime into matching its words with action. Siniora said he would be discussing the letter with all of Lebanon's political blocs, employing it extensively in media interviews, as well as sending it to the Syrian government to prompt a response. Siniora clearly appreciated this additional piece of international leverage with which to deal with Bashar al-Asad's regime.

#### REACTION TO U.S. BUSINESS DELEGATION

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¶15. (SBU) When cautioned that a private U.S. business delegation (Business Executives for National Security) intended to visit Damascus next week and meet with Bashar al-Asad -- and that the delegation had no USG connection -- Siniora had little reaction. He said he appreciated the advance warning and the fact that private delegations were merely that. Siniora did ask if there might be some way to take advantage of the delegation's visit, perhaps to deliver a message, but on second thought essentially set the idea aside. He asked to be notified if the visit were canceled.

#### FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION RE-EMPHASIZED

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¶16. (SBU) PM Siniora unequivocally stated that freedom of expression was and will remain a basic tenet of Lebanon's democracy. He said that discussion of a recommendation from the Higher Media Council to penalize the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation for the broadcast of a program satirizing Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah was discussed in the Cabinet on June 8, but the recommendation was dismissed. Siniora did say that the Cabinet chastised the station for needless provocation, but had also taken Hizballah to task for the senseless street demonstrations that followed the broadcast. Siniora expressed hope that all Lebanon's political parties might observe a more moderate tone in their criticisms, but that criticism itself was an essential right.

COMMENT

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¶17. (C) We hope that Siniora's optimism about overcoming reluctance to the electoral law is not misplaced. Our impression is that Saad Hariri, focused on what he sees as disadvantageous electoral districts, will oppose it, despite what his Prime Minister says. Hariri and Siniora had a one-on-one luncheon on 6/10 (the day after the Ambassador's meeting with Siniora), and both are mum about what was discussed. But we expect that the election law draft was among the topics, as was the subsequent announcement that the Higher Judicial Council has at last been appointed. In the matter of the Judicial Council, Saad's perspective -- to accept the nominations of Minister of Justice Charles Rizk -- prevailed over Siniora's position, which was to accept a list of nominees assembled by judges themselves.

FELTMAN